

MEMORANDUM OF CONVERSATION
BIPARTISAN LEADERS BREAKFAST
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Senator Fulbright said that he would like to raise another point, and that was whether it was wise for the President to take responsibility for the U-2 flights. He said that he himself thought that disavowal would probably have been better.



In response the President said that when the plane was first missing, no one knew what had happened. It had been thought that if the plane got into trouble it would be destroyed, all material on board would be destroyed, and that the pilot would be free of any such material. On this assumption the story of a weather plane would have been able to stick. But, he added, the assumptions were incorrect. Within a few days the balloon was up. Senator Fulbright said that he still didn't think it was wise to take full responsibility. President Eisenhower responded that he thought it was, that if he didn't take responsibility someone else would have had to. He said he agreed that Khrushchev had tried to give him an out on this, but that he looked upon it as his responsibility, and he assumed it.

"Incidentally," he said with a smile, "if anyone were punished they should punish me first." He said that anyone sitting in his chair wouldn't want to put the CIA on the spot, and would not want to disown the CIA or its Director. He said that in addition to being President, he was also Commander-in-Chief, and he didn't see how he could duck this responsibility. He said he would be interested to see what the majority opinion of Fulbright's Committee would be on this point.

At this point Congressman Vinson leaned over and whispered to me that the President was dead right, that Fulbright was all wrong on his thesis, and that he, Vinson, thought the President had acted quite right in assuming responsibility. He said - "That's the kind of a man he is anyway.")

Senator Johnson then asked whether our intelligence would suffer by the discontinuance of the U-2 flights.